

*Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement*

*Opening statement by Niall Murphy and Laura Harmon, Ireland's Future Tuesday 1 June 2021*

## **Introduction**

Thank you to the Chair and Committee members for the invitation to address you today.

The focus of this opening statement is on the questions that have arisen, in relation to the constitutional future of our shared island in the context of the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

I am the secretary of Ireland's Future. Our organisation was established to advocate for, and promote, debate and discussion about Ireland's future, including the possibility and viability of new constitutional arrangements on the Island. We are guided by the values of the Good Friday Agreement and dedicated to the promotion and protection of human rights, equality and fostering mutual respect between all views and traditions that share this island.

Ireland's Future consider that any move to new constitutional arrangements requires serious thought, consideration and planning.

We believe that the requisite planning for these potential changes must be broad, inclusive, detailed and comprehensive.

Constitutional change must be on the basis of the consent of citizens of the island of Ireland, as informed by the Good Friday Agreement

I have attached to this opening statement, our mission statement, values and objectives for your ease of consideration.

## **EVENTS**

Prior to the event of the pandemic, Ireland's Future had organised conferences and town hall meetings, to give expression to the ongoing societal conversation in relation to constitutional change.

Our 'Beyond Brexit: The Future of Ireland' was organised in consultation with the Department of Foreign Affairs and was addressed by the leaders of Sinn Féin, the SDLP, the Green Party in the north, the deputy leader of Fianna Fáil Dara Calleary and by Government Minister of Education Joe McHugh TD. The event was attended by over 2000 people. This was followed in 2019 by well attended events in Newry and Croke Park, which were addressed by High Court Judge Mr Justice Richard Humphreys and Professor Seamus McGuinness of the ESRI, among others and I attach copies of the event literature hereto for your attention.

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Chairperson Senator Frances Black | Secretary Niall Murphy

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## CORRESPONDENCE

Our events were complemented by public letters to An Taoiseach appealing to the Irish Government in the first instance to consider the position of Irish citizens in the north in the context of an emerging rights vacuum, then with regards to the then deepening Brexit crisis. Our most recent letter in November 2019 urged the Government to convene an all-Island Citizens Assembly as a forum to enable discussion on future constitutional change.

This letter was signed by over 1000 prominent Irish citizens, two thirds of the signatories resident in the south, and also by many citizens of the Irish Diaspora. Prominent signatories included actor Adrian Dunbar, Stephen Rea, director Jim Sheridan, Mayor of Boston and now US Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh, writer Eoin Colfer, poets Paula Meehan and Theo Dorgan, musicians Christy Moore, Aoife Scott and Sharon Shannon, economist David McWilliams and commentators Fintan O'Toole and Martina Devlin as well as our own Frances Black, whom we are proud to have as Chairperson of our organisation. All of our public correspondences are included in our event literature, for the Waterfront, Newry and Croke Park.

## WEBCASTS

With the event of the pandemic, we took our activism on line as zoom became our new normal and indeed this has permitted us to increase our reach and to deepen the meaningful conversations that are ongoing.

The calibre of contributors we have attracted, aligned with the breadth of viewer participation has been remarkable.

The standing, range and influence of people involved with Ireland's Future and vast reach we benefit from is evident from our recent series of webcasts<sup>1</sup> which have attracted exceptional viewerships for live and post reviews of these webcasts which addressed,

1. 7 May 2020 *Implications of Covid 19 for health provision across the island and an All Island health Service.*  
Dr Ilona Duffy, Professor Gabriel Scally and Professor Jim Dornan
2. 28 May 2020 *Economic recovery beyond Covid and an all island economy*  
David McWilliams, economist and SDLP advisor Paul Gosling and Patricia McKeown from Unison
3. 25 June 2020 *Brexit and the Irish Protocol*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://irelandsfuture.com/videos/>

Tony Connelly of RTÉ, Brian Feeney and Owen Reidy

4. 8 October 2020 *A Vision for Ireland - the next generation of Irish voices*  
Denise Chaila, Senator Eileen Flynn, Laura Harmon, Neil McManus and Conal Ó Corra.
5. 9 December 2020 *Online interview with Congressman Richie Neal, Chair of the influential Ways and Means Committee*
6. 11 February 2021 *A New Ireland – Warm House for All*

Our Warm House event was our most successful with over 40,000 viewers across all platforms. All of the participants were from a traditionally Unionist background.

Belfast born, award winning television and radio broadcaster, Andrea Catherwood chaired the conversation with Mark Langhammer, Denzil McDaniel, Rev Karen Sethuraman, Glenn Bradley and Trevor Lunn MLA.

This was a significant event and is evidence of an ever widening range of people are contributing to the conversation about Ireland's Future.

New voices are speaking up, they are from all backgrounds and they are asking questions about the future of Ireland. We are delighted that Trevor Lunn MLA has since formally joined the research and publication sub-committee of Ireland's Future.

Ireland's Future appeals to everyone but particularly to the government in Dublin to listen attentively to this conversation and to begin planning and preparing for constitutional change.

## **RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS**

We have conducted our own research and have produced literature setting out the deliberate steps that require to be taken to effect constitutional change in a responsible, legal fashion, consistent with the Good Friday Agreement.

I attach for your consideration our three published research documents to date:

1. A Principled Framework for Change 5 November 2020
2. Advancing the Conversation, The Way Forward 28 January 2021
3. Planning for a Strong Economy in a New Ireland 25 March 2021

**I am obliged to the Chair and the Committee for your time and attention and would now like to introduce my colleague Laura Harmon, Head of Mobilisation for the Together for Yes campaign and was President of USI during the Marriage Equality Referendum, to discuss further the concept and benefits of a Citizens Assembly.**

**LAURA HARMON**

### **A CITIZEN'S ASSEMBLY**

Our analysis, supported and shaped by the finest, internationally acclaimed academics, is that the pathway to concurrent Referenda is most likely to be achieved through the convention of a Citizens Assembly.

Such an assembly will be rigorously impartial from external political influence. It will commission research, reports, and economic modelling.

This is a well-worn constitutional path, that has already led to successful civic movements and been decisive in securing positive outcomes for progressive changes through referenda.

A civic assembly is a forum in which political issues would be discussed by its membership and ultimately voted upon.

Typically this would be made up of both citizens selected at random but could include a number of elected politicians.

It should hear expert evidence and produce recommendations.

In addressing the models of re-unification it would serve to counter some of the mythology and “fears” which surround Irish reunification – e.g. the block grant, health care provision, taxation, education standards.

It can be set up to allow a government to entrust “the people” with setting the direction on a controversial subject for example.

The result is then one which can be kept at arm’s length or embraced depending on political expediency.

#### *Recent examples*

The most notable recent examples are the constitutional convention of 2012-2014 and the citizens assembly of 2016

The Convention recommended extension of the Presidential voting franchise, received wide support in the Oireachtas but has yet to be put to the electorate for approval

The citizens assembly sat for 18 months and amongst other things the civic assembly recommended the repeal of the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment’s prohibition on abortion in the State

### *A Citizens Assembly on Irish Reunification*

If a citizens' assembly was to consider proposals for Irish reunification it should include political representatives and citizens from both jurisdictions on the island (and possibly Britain)

However, non-participation by elected Unionist politicians should not prevent it taking place. Constitutional change is already upon these islands and the only responsible course of action for the Irish government is to undertake what it reasonably can to prepare for the next stage of Irish self-determination, whatever choice that may be.

A Citizens Assembly would also consider what constitutional amendments would be necessary to the Irish Constitution to ensure continued adherence to the principles of the Good Friday Agreement.

It would be an opportunity to examine the competing models of reunification on the basis of reliable information and data. It should, in particular, consider the responsibilities on the Irish State to adhere to the obligations of the sovereign power in Northern Ireland.

#### *Practical Arrangements*

- a) In the Republic it would be set up by a resolution of the Oireachtas and be funded by the Department of Finance.
- b) Its terms of reference would be set out in that resolution of the Oireachtas.
- c) It has no formal role to require or even recommend constitutional or legislative change in the Republic but it would command considerable political importance.
- d) Irish government would be required to respond to its suggestions.
- e) It is our view that it would have to be a project initiated by the Irish government.  
(The possibility of a joint Irish-British constitutional convention modelling reunification is unlikely)

### **CONCLUSION**

The event of Brexit has changed everything, forever. The constitutional security of the north as a part of the United Kingdom, has been thrust into terminal decline by Brexit. A Border Poll is the Constitutional Pathway back to the EU for all citizens resident in this island to reset the democratic deficit which Brexit represents.

The Good Friday Agreement which was overwhelmingly mandated by the people of Ireland on both sides of the Border, provides an inbuilt democratic and legislative pathway out of this madness, with a Border Poll.

The debate is happening and has been acknowledged by the former President of Ireland Mary McAleese. This is a conversation which is happening in staff rooms, coffee shops, school car parks, at the side of football pitches up and down the country.

This debate needs to be informed by rationality and planning, because this debate cannot be characterised by the recklessness, ill preparedness and arrogance of the Brexit debate. The Irish Government, the EU and the US administration need to begin planning for the inevitable.

A reminder of this is to be found in the growing number of initiatives that are producing useful research outputs, much of which accords with our established positions, supports our efforts or is assisting our thinking. The preparations are now well underway and gathering pace.

We note the valuable work being undertaken by the ARINS Project - a collaboration between the Royal Irish Academy and the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies at Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs - including, for example, an excellent contribution by Adele Bergin and Seamus McGuinness on living standards and quality of life on the island of Ireland.

The Shared Island Unit and the ESRI have launched a significant new research programme that will explore areas such as health and education on the island. We also note with interest that the UCL Working Group on Unification Referendums has essentially followed our lead in calling for extensive advance planning and preparation. The report notes the years of acrimony over Brexit highlight the real dangers of calling a vote without adequate advance planning.

If the Good Friday Agreement really does underpin the new relationships, then no one need be anxious about this invitation to a conversation about how we share this island in the future.

A Border Poll is in fact wholly consistent with the vision laid out in the GFA. Our island is on a path towards concurrent referendums on whether people would prefer a united Ireland (and thus EU membership) or wish to retain the Union with Britain. This is acknowledged within the internal constitutional legal orders of both states, underpinned by international law, and recognition is implied by the EU in its endorsement of the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts. Making use of the arrangements to test the principle of consent/right to self-determination - at the appropriate time and with proper preparation - should provoke no one. Planning has commenced; the governments must catch up.